

Oscillating Shadows

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Contents

Abstract

Introduction

1. The Attraction to Photography
 - 1.1 Background/ Methodology
 - 1.2 Previous works
 - 1.3 Long exposures and darkness - from instant to duration
2. From Stillness to Constant Movement
 - 2.1 Towards the video image
 - 2.2 Black box - analogue-digital conversion
 - 2.3 Oscillating shadows
3. Graduation Project
 - 3.1 The gaze
 - 3.2 Watertank
 - 3.3 A pier

Conclusion

Bibliography

Images

Abstract

The following essay is an attempt to disclose my artistic research over the last two years. Parallel to my visual working process, some theoretical aspects will be discussed, and together these strands form the core of my practice. This text provides an insight into my methodology as well as a documentation of the graduation work. Within a linear order, two main fields of enquiry will be approached. First I will focus on photography's main concepts insofar as they relate to my work. The second chapter deals with the video image (the digital moving image) in light of these concepts. The third chapter contains a description of the intended outcome and takes in the dialogue between the topics discussed in the first two chapters. My conclusion then resumes the process towards the actual work and clarifies what prospects are given through the final graduation project.

Introduction

Having a background in photography, I now work with the intersection of the analogue still image and the electronic moving image. Within this constellation my interest focuses on their media specificity. An initial observation between stillness and movement indicates a different behaviour in time and ends with the question of their materiality and inherent constitution. I want to approach the notion of photography's «thereness» and what the coexistence of an absent presence in relation to its indexical imprint could imply. As the interface between two temporalities—the current one of the picture and the past one of the depicted—a photograph creates a duality. Due to this, the apparent stillness seems to dissolve and consequently evokes the topic of the uncanny that occurs between the frozen image and the reanimated past. It is interesting to look at the digital video image and examine exactly how far it stands in opposition to the photographic image. While digitally split, its fragments are in constant movement: the image always lies between becoming and fading and is therefore never present as a whole. With this text I do not intend to make in-depth technical insights into these two technical images, but rather, I use their mechanisms as a conceptual framework to reflect on the image in relation to time. In addition to this, the confrontation of the analogue photographic image and the digital moving image introduces the question of materiality and thus its character of indexicality.

Through the deepened confrontation with my research, a repeated topic became evident and summarised most of the aspects I am dealing with: the ungraspable and fragile moment, the threshold of an image's existence that oscillates between presence and absence. The chapter Black box explores what is being transformed or «lost» in the analogue-digital conversion. I key into this point and investigate the construction and dissolution of the image itself.

My work is strongly based on intuition and tends toward introspection. During the working process, it is not always easy to define these rather unconscious mechanisms. Furthermore, it is often the quiet, abstract themes that are difficult to get to the heart of, and these challenge a clear articulation of my own work. Therefore, this thesis aims to translate my practice-based research into words in order to achieve clarification for myself. Nevertheless, my intention is to end up with an artist statement that addresses the audience.

While reflecting on the different temporalities in photography and the video image, the intangibility of time stands here as an analogy for the conflict inherent in attempting to translate my research into words. Laura Mulvey points out the difficulty of articulating the medium's relation to time that lies "beyond the verbal language" and description. This becomes even clearer when considering the general struggle to understand the passing of time itself and "the conceptual space of uncertainty: that is, the difficulty of understanding time and the presence of death in life." (Mulvey, p.182 & p.53) This is probably one of the main reasons why I work with photography and trust—sometimes more sometimes less—its ability to communicate my thoughts.

1. The Attraction to Photography

1.1 Background/ Methodology

In my first year in art school, I wanted to find out what personal value photography had for me in order to develop my own visual language. I started to write down in journals a collection of thoughts about it. The following lines are reflective of the writings in these booklets:

At that time, I printed a work in the darkroom without using photographic fixer, with the end result being that the images slowly faded away under the exposure of daylight in the exhibition space. I encountered the work of Christian Boltanski and was inspired by the theme of disappearance, which is prominent throughout his work. Simultaneously, I was influenced by Roland Barthes' writings about his mother, his idea of her being present in a photograph without being actually (t)here. I quickly realized that photography raises fundamental existential questions—it speaks about life and death.

Today I see this initial impulse to use photography as a search for something that has already passed. I was touched by the medium's ephemeral character and struck that, throughout its history, it refers to a disappearance and is thereby

linked with loss. I remember my wish to stop the fading of the images in my mind. I wanted to halt time and the photographic act seemed to enable this by seemingly cutting the course of time through pressing a trigger. I am aware of this transfigured viewpoint I once held on to, the attempt to conserve time and thereby preserve the past. But the awareness that every moment exists without return provided a shock that somehow might justify the desire to believe the deceptive promises of photography.

In addition, photography's inherent characteristic, namely, that film captures the light radiating from the portrayed inspired me to work with this technical image. The film's exposure to this light and subsequent chemical reaction with silver salts inevitably leaves a trace from the model. Although physically ungraspable, the connection between the subject and the photograph cannot be denied. Barthes' well known thought that "photography is literally understood, an emanation of the referent" (Barthes, p.90), only underlines this relevant relation. I think it is its inherent link with an absence dropped into the past that reinforces the strong presence of any photograph. This is particularly apparent in the long exposures of portraits from photography's early period, where time almost becomes visible and seems to engulf the figures in a pending state.

Another relevant aspect of my former work was that I saw photography as somehow linked with anxiety: an ambiguous feeling that arises from both fascination and repulsion. These two incommensurable states describe the sublime, which applies very well to the process of photography. I might have applied photography as a way of overcoming anxiety, almost as if by delving into the medium I might be able to give grief a certain value and to understand it. This might explain my interest in the night as a descent into the unknown. Its blackness can be so intense and charged that it attracts one in the same way as a light. I remember how I saw the night as origin and therefore tried to find answers in it. At that time I was influenced by the époque of Romanticism, particularly German Dark Romanticism, with its exploration of human madness and evocation of irrational atmospheres. I recognised related ideas in this époque; an approach that is more connected to our inner-self than to the outside world, where artists explored their contemporary culture and nature, investing the night with a special value: as a moment to hide from the illuminated and enlightened cities. Anxiety also worked as a muse for me. It was like a presentiment, an undefined compulsion and pursuit paired with the constant vibration of a negative presence. This is why I remain fascinated by the idea of subliminal perception of the ungraspable.

I often used photographs as drafts of my ideas. In an early work I reproduced a series of family portraits, all shot completely out of focus. This piece emerged from a personal history, but had the aim of creating enough freedom for the audience to produce their own imaginary world around it, as the abstraction of the blur left an

uncertainty as to the actual content of the images. I realise today that I was, even then, more interested in the relation between the viewer and the photograph than in the specific representation in each image. The difference between the picture and the depicted might be obvious, but can still create confusion. It is perhaps this effect of reality that enables illusions and evokes uncertainty about the truth of a photograph.

This ambiguity was another aspect that interested me. I used the technical image to create my own imaginary world, constructed false realities and sought situations where only a small amount of light allowed things to exist in the image. Based on an initial observation of the visible world, I wanted to transform it and achieve a better understanding. Photography provided order, a seeming sense of control. It is close to our own perception but still seems to access a different universe. I wanted to reach through an exterior perception to an inner view. This dialogue between inwardness and exteriority is perhaps what best summarises my initial access to this medium.

This relationship between the interior and exterior can be expressed by the metaphor of the window, which has a prominent role in photography with its idea of transparency as being a direct view to the visible world, and opacity as a closed frame figuring as projection screen. I once photographed the same window from the inside with diverse exposures and different positions of the curtain. Maybe it is also not a coincidence that the first photograph of Nicéphore Niépce was a window, fixed on bitumen after hours of recording. Another striking example comes from Henri Fox Talbot, taken in 1842, depicting a view out of a closed window half obscured by curtains. In a description by the writer Timm Sarl, he mentions a threshold arising in the picture, where the gaze fluctuates between inside and outside, halting each time on the crossbar of the frame. (Starl)

As well as the transitory moment of exposure, where the world connects with the photographic film, there is also the feeling, while contemplating the picture, of a transition between here and there. In a photograph this exchange is clear, and an obscure view out of a window enables an even stronger impression. This may also be from where the imagination of the beholder takes its strength; her gaze becomes central and raises the question of whether the viewer creates the image.

1.2 Previous works

Aster, 2008

Aster (lat. astrum “star”) is the name of a long-living flower that stands up to winter and is often used as a symbol of decay and inner torment in poetry from the German Expressionist movement. *Aster* is a mixture of portraits, still lifes and outdoor nightscapes. All of the twenty-five photographs show images where nothing is moving; everything seems to be halted in a state of waiting. Sylvie Henguely writes:

“In these photographs reigns a disturbing silence, only interrupted by the blowing of the wind passing through the empty scenes, by the buzzing light from the neon tube or by the little-noticed fall of the flower when it detaches from her dried out plant. With an overall atmosphere of the night, the work invites the viewer to meditate, as the opening picture indicates. This photograph of a figure with closed eyes and head tilted downwards functions as an allegory of introspection. It leads towards a descent into the depths of the night, into the unconscious. In *Aster* there are two different kinds of images with two distinct temporalities. On the one side there are night shots of urban landscapes in black and white. Related to duration, they are long exposures of several minutes. They show places of empty passages engulfed by a diffuse light in a mute atmosphere. The images slowly engrave the film and thereby access their visibility little by little. Rich in shades of grey, these photographs contrast sharply with the other group of images. This time in colour, they assemble objects, shot with a flash in the studio in front of a black background. Only in a fraction of a second the objects are registered and lie pending now in an unknown space. *Aster* explains nothing, its images rather work as catalysts; they only suggest the starting point for a reflection. Normally photography allows one to see the visible, but in these images the opposite predominates. It is the unseen that constitutes the veritable referent. These photographs are haunted by absence.” (Henguely)

Le Sapin, 2010

For this work I was invited to create a series for the retrospective exhibition of the woodcut artist Pierre Aubert. During my first visit to his archive, I was intrigued by the deep black and dark shimmering surfaces of the original wood blocks. When moving these, they appeared almost like Daguerreotypes, oscillating between negative and positive. In particular, his woodcuts of forest scenes moved in an uncertain atmosphere between day and night. Due to this experience, and my initial interest in the night, I decided to work with long exposures. I used sheet film, which, together with the slow engraving of the light, pointed to the production time and the imprint of Aubert’s wooden blocks.

Le Sapin allowed me to deepen my interest in the photographic process, its behaviour in time and its materiality. The central image in the series is a photograph of a silver-painted fir tree, framed in a vertical format that refers to the gesture of portraiture. The fir's enigmatic presence is solidified by the silver paint, while it is simultaneously represented by the means of the photographic silver salts. The print measures 2.5 x 2 meters and figures as a portal within the night-time universe of the series. The choice of silver paint reinforces the topic of media specificity in the exhibition and introduces the metallic surfaces present in the picture opposite: a large still life showing a composition of insects grouped around a big stag beetle lying on its back. The situation shifts between admiration, curiosity and repulsion toward the dead body, composed almost like an image of a wake and framed in dark wood.

A sequence of three dark, horizontal, night shots of the forest were installed high above Aubert's relatively small and fragile woodcut prints. This shift in dimension created an additional tension between the works. In each of them time seemed to be petrified—a feeling provoked by the long exposure of the night shots and the changelessness of the forest. However, the peaceful appearance of the trees figures only as facade, a screen on which the audience can begin to imagine what could lie behind the vegetation.

The series ends with a photograph of an old dying larch opposite a self-portrait. The latter is shot on Polaroid and refers to the process of woodcut printing, and the moment when the negative side of the Polaroid is pulled off to reveal the final picture. In addition, the Polaroid's chemical emulsion left traces, creating a veil over the figure's face. This rather soft surface stands in strong contrast with the porous texture of the larch. The curator Philippe Känel comments on this juxtaposition: "one could say it is the quest for resemblance, to finally end up in a statement of the uncanny." (Känel)

Schwarzes Licht, 2010

My interest lies in themes of perception, psychoanalysis and the night. It is the night that holds an important place as a subject and establishes an essential condition for the main focus of my work. In 2010, I created a work for a gallery that was situated close to a bridge, with a botanical garden on one side and a centre for drug addicts on the other. In Freud's essay *Theme of the Three Caskets*, he mentions the three fates who spin (Clotho), measure (Lachesis) and cut (Atropos) the thread of life. In psychoanalysis, this thread is structured by a series of situations produced by ruptures. Site-specific concerns combined with Freud's writings on the life force helped construct a framework for the show, for

which I created a visual outcome that could be read as a metaphorical representation of the whole subject.

I wanted to make use of the gallery's big front window to involve the incidental light of both day and night and to allow a 24-hour view for pedestrians. In addition came the wish to work with big white sheets of paper in the white gallery space as an inversion of my former focus on darkness. The photographs I had taken of drug addicts from the centre next door and nightshade plants from the botanic garden were transferred into silkscreens and printed with fluorescent liquid that only appears under black light tubes. The following description by N. Richard in an interview with me clarifies the installation:

“Large leaves of immaculate whiteness are suspended on white walls. Neons emitting a black light are buzzing on the roof. As the hours pass and the darkness intensifies, the light from the tubes begin to dominate and to gradually reveal silkscreens printed on the paper. Portraits of drug addicts begin to appear opposite the solanaceous plants. In the manner of Atropos—also the name giver to the deadly nightshade *Atropa belladonna*—the nature and intensity of the light source structures the cycle of appearance and disappearance of the images in *Schwarzes Licht*. The spectator's visual experience is therefore subject to time. While visible at night, these human and vegetal bodies vanish in the daylight. This inversion of visibility/invisibility and day/night refers directly to the opposition of life/death. These latent images reveal themselves to those patient enough to wait for them—or they surprise those who aren't expecting to see them.” (Richard)

1.3 Long exposure and darkness – from instant to duration

In former works I often used long exposure. Initially, I was fascinated by the idea of moving at the border of visibility to discover what is left unseen. I used the photographic camera as a possibility to reveal what the naked eye was not able to perceive. I wanted to challenge the darkness, which represents the negation of photography itself. The time spent waiting in the dark, next to my tripod, was not only about the necessary exposure time needed by the camera, but also my own time spent imagining the outcome of the recorded photograph. Through the adaptation of my eye, the surrounding became more visible and created anticipation as to how the final image could look. By using this decelerated, delayed way of creating an image, which is obviously connected to stillness, and a simultaneous contemplation of silence, I discovered a way to reflect on the passing of time.

The process of long exposure links to psychoanalysis, where the invisible constitutes the main part. Furthermore, the layering created during the slow engraving of light on the film refers to the unconscious. I think this is an important aspect of my work and might clarify my interest in the inability to see clearly and the

uncertainty raised by this inability. The threshold of visibility as well as the threshold of consciousness creates doubt about the existence of the unseen. And it is exactly this point where darkness underlines what is inherent in each photograph: the ungraspable that shifts between presence and absence.

Blackness can be read as closer to nothingness, but at the same time it evokes the presentiment to contain the whole universe, as in Greek mythology where the night (lat. nyx) is the origin of everything. Mark Rothko's late period black paintings serve to consolidate my thoughts about darkness. While looking at the abstract black surfaces, with no point of reference, the spectator is confronted with her incapacity to see. She is asked to make an effort to understand and to focus, and this process of contemplation throws her back on herself.

What interests me in Rothko's work is the idea of irrepresentability that is declared through his painting. I am fully aware that an essential difference between painting and photography is that the latter can never reach the same level of abstraction, because it is conditioned by the physical world. However, it is the reference to an elsewhere that connects with the essence of a photograph and can be found in its purest form in the darkness of Rothko's black paintings.

A long exposure not only reveals the unseen, but also underlines the two different temporalities that interfere with each other as instant turns into duration through the extension of a fraction of a second. In German the word instant can be translated to *Augenblick*, which refers to the tiny moment when the eye blinks. An instant is immediately followed by another, meaning duration might be nothing other than an accumulation of millions of independent instants. Is it possible that through photography, which can expose one single image for a longer duration, these rules of time can be transgressed?

After ten minutes, or more, of exposure the image gradually emerges out of the darkness: it is an accumulation of time that is now somehow conserved. I always imagine this to be a sedimentation of light engraved on the surface of the film. The production of the image leads then to the time of its perception. The present instant of the recording immediately falls into the past, but becomes present again in front of the spectator. This process already indicates a strange continuity of something that actually belongs to a previous moment. In other words, a photograph has the capacity to animate a former moment which can be revitalised in the beholder's memory. This is another way in which the instant in photography is extended into duration. The instant, right before that which follows, seems to be frozen in between; like a pendulum at its dead point. Does this imply that photography, with its cut into the flow of time, means a standstill, a pending in or out of time?

In Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs the uniform light and low contrast creates a diffuse atmosphere, lending his images a very soft appearance with an almost grey veil superimposed on the image, almost as if time itself becomes visible. These photographs, and in particular his seascapes, engage with the feeling of timelessness. I use his example to underline my thoughts about photography in relation to duration. What I specifically like in his work is its focus on absence, the emptiness, its standstill and its atemporal nature. It seems to evoke the idea that time has no beginning or end and is instead a cyclical element with no linear structure. About duration Sugimoto says: "The human eye, devoid of the shutter, is by necessity characterised by long exposure. The exposure of the human eye is one long process—it starts as soon as the new-born opens its eyes, and ends when the eyes are closed at the end of life." (Sugimoto, p.17)

In his seascapes, the long exposure eliminates every movement of the waves. They show views out to sea, each time with the horizon in the middle, cutting the image in two halves. "In emphasising these natural elements, Sugimoto drapes like a veil the decidedly intangible over the specific, the concept over the concrete, returning all seas to their fundamental state as water and air." (Brougher, p.23) Everything seems to be reduced, emphasising time's presence. In her essay on time in the photographic image Mirjam Wittmann writes: "In revealing time also as growing time the artist undermines the notion of the photograph as a frozen moment". Wittmann continues: "Sugimoto reinforces time as duration and makes you feel as if time stands still and moves on at the same time. (...) Instantaneity has been changed into a stream of time as if Sugimoto had infiltrated Henri Bergson's idea of duration". (Wittmann)

2. From Stillness to Constant Movement

2.1 Towards the video image

The themes of disappearance, darkness and duration led me to the subject of the limit of perception. For the two academic years of the master's programme I wanted to build on these main aspects from my previous work. My intention was to access them through the digital moving image, which enabled me to reflect on photography from a different perspective. I was interested in the construction of the image in a rather metaphorical way, and I wanted to approach some philosophical and poetic aspects of it in comparison with the still image. My intention was to observe how the image behaves at the border of visibility—not only between light and darkness, but this time with a focus on stillness and movement. One of my first experiments was a video of a tree shot using a fixed frame at night. The limitation of the camera's sensor provoked a lot of digital noise in the

underexposed zones. This effect reminded me of waking up at night and opening my eyes. During this moment, the adjustment of vision to the initial darkness is slow and provokes noise due to the overcharged photoreceptors. I always experienced this rather nervous sensation as frightening and fascinating at the same time—a simple observation of an artefact.

The interval of the crucial, unique instant created when triggering the camera is questioned by the use of long time exposure. When thinking about the construction of the electronic image, time again plays an important role. Philippe Dubois compares the grain of matter in analogue photography with the electronic raster of the video image: “Every point lights only after its antecedent and before its subsequent; which means there is only one single point that shines in time.” He goes on to write that this alternating illumination and termination implies that the video image, as such, never exists in space, only in time. “A synthesis of time that relies on succession, on endlessly spatial discontinuity. Whereas in photography the image exists entirely in space as in time.” (Dubois, p.106)

The concept of an image that is in constant movement and never present as a whole, while digitally split, immediately aroused my interest. Firstly, because it seems to be the complete opposite to the analogue photographic image; and secondly, because it allowed me, by virtue of that distance, to gain some new insight on the analogue image. One point of interest was the interaction of instantaneity and duration, which both seem to be inherent in the electronic moving image. While recording, the sensor in the camera is exposed to the light, which charges the photoreceptors with electrons; in the following, very short instant the receptors are emptied and the electronic charge transformed into a digital signal. Instantaneity in the digital process happens not only during the capture of the light, but also directly after its transformation. Another aspect of comparison between the analogue still with the digital video image is their materiality. If the essential characteristic of the index shifts in digitalisation, what are the fragments made of that then constitute the actual image and where is it created? What does it mean if it never exists all at once? These reflections about the conception of the moving image intensified my interest in the origin of the image, the role of the observer and her perception.

Filmed and photographed nightscapes

I started with an observation of underexposed videos of nightscapes filmed in a fixed frame. I recorded an outside scene for one minute. Directly after this, I replaced the video camera with a photographic camera and exposed the exact same scene for the same amount of time. This juxtaposition allowed me further reflections on how the image behaves. While the second shot was an accumulation of different layers of light in one single frame, the video is constructed conti-

nuously in time and space. I wanted to understand what we recognise through the use of zoom in the video or the enlarging of the photograph. Therefore, I printed the black and white negatives onto baryt paper and scanned them afterwards in a high resolution. This allowed me to look at the paper's surface as well as at the photographic grain, as if I was looking at it under a magnifying glass.

This self-referential language raised the question about dematerialisation during the analogue-digital conversion and what we actually see through the different interfaces. Next to the photographic prints, the short video sequences filmed in colour were all covered with noise. Due to the extremely low level of external input for the camera's sensor in the darkness, the device revealed its own electronic charge. I was attracted to the idea that this could be seen as the autonomy of the digital image. I was so much intrigued by this thought, that I wanted to create a space with large projection screens, presenting a graphical composition of different low light zones, where the noise provoked a strong vibration in the shadows and a buzzing feeling all over the exhibition space. Although this specific installation has not yet been realised, it helped me to define my research.

Filmed portraits

At the same time, I was influenced by Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*, in which he examines different devices in the 19th century and the shifting of perception. Additionally, I started to delve into theory of cinema, such as Laura Mulvey's *Death 24 Times a Second* and Kaja Silverman's *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Through these readings, and the encounter with Henri Bergson, I understood that at the heart of the juxtaposition of the still with the moving image are their different temporalities.

I started a series of filmed portraits, which were all recorded in a fixed frame with an additional counter-zoom (also called the vertigo effect after Alfred Hitchcock). The result is a change in perspective and a shifting between background and foreground. Concretely, the camera moves backwards or forwards while simultaneously zooming in or out. I used this effect with a black background to focus only on the alteration on the face of the subject. The modification of the perspective provoked an illusive movement, barely recognisable. The look of the subject into the camera, back to the audience, and the slight deformation of the face achieved the goal of leaving the spectator with an uncertainty as to who was the one that was shifting. In this project, the petrifying act of photography is examined through animated portraits, where subtle agitations interrupt the stillness of the model and thereby the spectator. The implication of the audience and its role while looking at an artwork become all the more important and introduces the theme of the gaze.

2.2 Black box – analogue-digital conversion

Curiosity for the unseen has led me to consider the theme of the black box. In ‘black boxing’ input and output is known, but the transition between them remains ambiguous. With the example of the analogue-digital conversion, I wanted to use the concept of the black box as a self-referential approach. I see it as a metaphor that allows me to combine and articulate different concerns I have in my work.

When photography was invented, the technical image was born and has evolved with enormous complexity through the last century. We might even consider today’s media itself as an impenetrable black box. What connects us with the inner life of each media is the interface, whose output always requires interpretation. The media philosopher Vilém Flusser underlines this point. He compares photography with traditional images, which are, as he argues, abstractions in the first degree, whereas the technical image is an abstraction in the third degree; the last part in a causal chain that requests decoding. Flusser argues that the whole construct of device and user can be seen as a black box, where the coding happens inside, and, therefore, every critique of the technical image has to be based on this interaction between man and machine in order to reveal the inner life. “As long as we are not in possession of this critical view that concerns the technical image, we remain illiterate.” (Flusser, p.13 -15)

Almost every gadget of modern communication and consumer electronics uses the technology of an analogue-digital converter that lies in the core of the device. The exact process could be examined in fine detail, but what is of interest here, is the meaning of the conversion. Under the aspect of a translation from one material into another, the question arises as to whether there is any loss during the process of conversion, and, if so, what is lost?

The digital video image

In *New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, the author Matthew Kirschenbaum embraces the essential during the process of digitising, where a bit is compared to an atom without any physical attributes. (Kirschenbaum, p.6) What constitutes a digital image is not matter anymore unlike the analogue photographic imprint. The digital image is built with symbols.

In another text that treats the same issue, the author Norman David Rodowick writes about three principal creative operations in digital cinemas: the digital capture, the synthesis and composing. During the digital capture the image is never recorded as a whole, because “the process of conversion or transcoding separates the image into discrete and mathematically modular elements”.

According to Rodowick this is why “the image is always a montage”. What is inherent in the digital image and a central distinction to the analogue image is clearly demonstrated at this point: “Digital synthesis produces an image of what never occurred in reality”. (Rodowick, p.165-166 & p.169) What specifically strikes me is that the digital image seems to float between construction and dissolution through the constant transformation of its elements—thus its character turns into something almost ungraspable.

To deepen this thought about the volatility of the digital video image, I would like to refer to Maurizio Lazzarato and his book *Videophilosophy*. He argues that compared to the immobile single frame in analogue cinema, video captures the pure vibrations of light. Its image “painted through an electronical brush” is therefore constantly moving and transforming. His reference to Bill Viola only underlines the fact that “in the video technology there is no solid image”, because it stands in the “continuous flow of electronical impulses”. Lazzarato relates the process of the video image to Henri Bergson’s conception of the image as “artificial product of the mind”. For him, the impact of light provokes not a single image, but excitations that affect our brain, which then needs the intervention of memory to compose these millions of vibrations. This is what he calls “intellectual work” and Lazzarato completes: “only through this we see and perceive”. (Lazzarato, p.65-66, p.72, p.94)

The analogue photographic image

Clearly opposed to the constantly moving digital image stands the petrification of the object during the moment of the photographic exposure. In his book *The Photographic Act*, Philippe Dubois refers to the myth of Orpheus, who turns into stone while looking back, in relation to the photographic model who petrifies while being seen through the camera. The other essential characteristic of the analogue image, compared to the digital, is its inherent indexicality: the physical contact of the light that connects the analogue film with the referent. Based on this, Dubois argues that the uniqueness of the referent leads to the principle of singularity of the index. Although a photograph can be reproduced hundreds of times, its negative always remains a unique imprint. This particularity strongly contrasts with the infinite possibilities of combinations of symbols in the digital image.

It is the materiality of the photographic image that makes the difference: the silver salt crystals that are hit by the light constitute the physical substance of the actual image. Dubois argues that the photochemical image cannot be compared with the electronic raster. He mentions that the silver salt crystals are very uneven and without a precise order or fixed orientation unlike the points of the electronic image, which are similar and ordered in a very strict model. (Dubois, p.93, p.74, p.105)

Imaging the inner life of the camera leads us back to what is hidden, what we do not see and that which we cannot be a part of. Or in the words of Maurice Blanchot: “the essence of the photograph is that it lies completely exterior to, and yet is as inaccessible and mysterious as the inner imagination; hidden, but still apparent, it is this presence-absence that creates its fascination.” (Barthes, p.117)

Can the concept of the black box relate to the interaction between the photographer and the camera, or the device itself, or the final image? What holds my unbroken attraction to the technical image is the question of the threshold between exclusion and control over the mechanisms of photography. Perhaps the whole working method can be considered as a black box, with deviations between the input and the output. There is still no display that shows a preview of the final result.

2.3 Oscillating shadows

Even though I became aware that noise was technically nothing but an artefact of either the sensor or the codec, I was still strongly attracted to the temporal moving noise in the low light areas. I saw it in relation to our own challenged vision in the dark, and I recognised the construction of the image as embedded in the act of seeing. I was heading towards an image that moves between materiality and pure signal, between duration and instant. My aim was to explore the electronic moving image in a video installation, where the viewer finds herself in a darkened room. The vibration created through underexposure evoked the provisional title *Oscillating Shadows*.

What I was searching for comes together and forms the core of my current research—namely, an image that fluctuates between construction and dissolution. This leads, once more, back to our own vision and the constant movement of the image that only remains in memory. It is this disappearance and appearance of the image in a continual movement of becoming and fading—the passage of time that is like an ungraspable image, out of our reach—that I want to articulate in my graduation project.

3. Graduation Project

Through the juxtaposition of stillness and movement, I realised I was interested in the threshold of an image's intangibility, which can be found at the core of the video image as well as in photography's inherent shift between presence and absence. Therefore, the tentative title of *Oscillating Shadows* finds its meaning. The graduation show creates an environment using three different elements: a large projection of a dark, almost unreadable, photographic portrait, a video of a water tank with floating photographs and a film showing a reflecting body of water at the seaside. Inspired by some abstract concepts, my visual research is strongly based on intuition and often starts with an observation and a feeling, which I then try to reconstruct and build a universe around. The following three works move between pure observation and construction, between exclusion and control over the emergence of the image. I have learnt to accept the equivalence of these two poles in my work. While dealing with the topic of disappearance and loss, photography always provided control. The focus on its handcraft and exactitude was emphasised through a slow working process. In the last months I have started to work more freely and more spatially around the image—enjoying again the ability to observe how the image behaves.

3.1 The gaze

A wall-sized, dark, almost unreadable portrait stands in the centre of my graduation project and concludes most of the core concepts of my current research. My initial intention for a large projection of a filmed portrait reappears here, although this time in a photographic still. This slide projection engulfs a separately constructed wall covered with a layer of grainy concrete. This 4 meter high wooden screen hangs, almost clamped, in between floor and ceiling. The grainy material continues along the floor, as if the image has seeped into the room, thereby underlining the sculptural character of the piece. The image itself is underexposed and indicates, through the shape of a silhouette, a human figure. The strong granularity of the high resolution film is emphasised through the enormous enlargement. This grain and the darkness of the portrait provoke a vibrating image in front of the spectator's eyes while her concentrated gaze attempts to decipher more details in the face, which has sunken into the grain of the wall and the image itself.

Through its monumentality, the photographic portrait constitutes a very strong presence in the exhibition space. Nevertheless, like the unconscious, the image is difficult for the viewer to register, or to use the example of the latent image, it is something that physically exists as an imprint on film, but is not yet accessible to our vision. Through the simplicity of the form, it is not clear if the portrait is an image of a human or a model.

Arising doubts about the seen underlies my intention to search, using photography, the threshold between the frozen and the animate. Furthermore, the incapacity to see clearly links this work to my previous works and the central role of the night. The loss of vision is a primal fear and is immediately connected with a psychological space that stands between the lost and the hidden. The adjustment of the viewer's eye is necessary while looking at the projected portrait, meaning that the image itself triggers a process where the vision of the viewer, and, thus, the body of the viewer, adapts to the surrounding space. It is only after a while, when the image finally starts to reveal itself to the beholder, or the beholder adapts to meet the image, that it dissolves again into the dark. The spectator's vision is challenged while she tries to recognise the ungraspable image projected onto the wall.

The buzzing appearance of this portrait, due to the low level of material information, links it to the noise of the underexposed video image and its inherent fragmentation. The monumental projection of the photographic still only allows the viewer to perceive parts of it when standing close to it, meaning the image seems to be never present as a whole. As we have seen in Bergson's conception of "intellectual work", the portrait needs the intervention of the viewer's memory to compose the millions of vibrations of light into a coherent image. This strongly implicates the role of the observer in constituting the final image.

The wish to include the human figure is based on an intuitive decision. Nevertheless, the constant focus on the limits of perception leads to questions around the act of seeing, the role of the spectator and finally to the topic of the gaze; a theme that has a prominent part throughout my research. I was interested in the stillness of the model and made some tests with self-portraits. It became almost a performative act in front of the camera to stand still for several minutes and focus on the lens, which reappears and disappears in the dark. This experience made me realise that there is an incapacity to see in both directions: the photographic camera accumulated light, whereas my eyes only perceived the continuous lighting. Here, the unseeable and the unreadable seem to converge. I wanted to approach the limit of an image's emergence, between the negation of the image and the image in its purest form. In the projected slide, the audience is confronted by the portrait's gaze, turning the spectator into a subject. This active relationship between the photograph and the viewer creates an image that oscillates between observation and construction.

Next to the time of an image, what interests me also is its materiality, photography's matter: silver salt crystals. My intention is to enter the image through its texture and play with the dialogue between indexicality and the immateriality of the projection. What the audience can perceive is only a sign in transition from being seen and fading away. As we have seen before, a photograph always refers to an existential absence. This becomes even more obvious in the case of a photographic portrait.

The fluctuation between the here of the image and the there of the referent is what animates the seeking gaze in the image. I am intrigued by the topic of dematerialisation, the shift between essence and appearance and the question about what remains. And so, like a dissolving image or the body of the viewer adapting and merging into the darkened space, the grainy matter from the projection surface spreads from the wall and onto the ground in front of it, and in this shift from screen to floor it can be contemplated not just as a functional surface but as material itself, like the silver nitrate of photography.

3.2 Watertank

Although visually completely different, the second element in the installation stands in direct dialogue with the slide projection of the portrait. A flatscreen is placed in the corner, resting on the floor and leaning against the wall. With a view from above, the beholder looks at a video of a watertank in a photographic darkroom. The circulation of water in the tank moves small photographs around, showing the front-side of the image, before turning over. The flow of water and the limitation of the basin creates an accumulation of prints, which dissolves in the next wave created by the mechanics of the watertank.

The scene becomes a repeating cyclical phenomenon, creating a new composition each time through chance and the repeated mechanical functions of the tank. With no sound to accompany the video, the almost stillness of the slow moving sheets of paper is emphasised. Furthermore, the transparency of the water reinforces the floating state of the photographs. This piece began during my work in the darkroom; as I printed my negatives onto small baryt papers I suddenly perceived the watertank in another light. Due to my deeper interest in the threshold between stillness and movement I contemplated the floating sheets differently. Afterwards, I wanted to reconstruct the scene in a video, filmed using a static frame. Next to my need to record this initial observation, I realised a desire to control it. Video allowed me to stop time, to move back and forth and to focus differently on the interaction between water and paper. In this new way of seeing, the possibility to halt the moving image revealed more details. Furthermore, the digital video promised an endless amount of recombinations, however, what I still could not control was the arbitrariness of the water that conducted the whole scene.

The shift of a still image into a moving object creates different temporalities that, here, interfere with each other. As we have seen before, the photograph is already linked to different kinds of time to which is added the recording time of the video and the time of its perception. The focus on the photograph that is now moving turns it into something present and redirects the beholder to her own temporality, standing outside the video. Next to the temporal shift, where the image changes

from frozen to animate, its rigid form is molded by the surrounding water: the photographs take on shapes far removed from their original flatness and transforms the scene in the watertank into something more sculptural.

Although attracted to photography's inherent link to the referent, and, thereby, its connection to the surrounding world, I was always more intrigued by the meaning of its mechanisms than by a concrete representation. This is why I tried to bypass the denotation of a specific subject to focus purely on the process of the image. As with earlier projects, I used photography in this instance to refer to something else. The motion of images in the watertank presents a movement between front and back, the disclosed and the hidden, and creates a focus on ideas of the unseen and absence in order to recognise something more essential. For the first version of this video I used the nightscapes that I made earlier when exploring the juxtaposition of analogue photography with digital video. These nightshots were of empty exterior scenes with the focus on staircases, doors and windows all linked to an absence and a moment of transition.

While presenting the first drafts of the video, I began to see that the process of revealing and hiding the image could not be separated from the question of the image's content. One possibility for the floating photographs could have been an image sequence, or one single image cut into pieces, to be rebuilt by the viewer. My approach was to base the content of the image on the process of the unconscious where single, apparently unrelated, images intuitively appear. The idea of archetypes emerged, followed by my intention to reduce the photographed scenes from parts of the house to more simplified forms. Furthermore, I was inspired by the idea that each photograph is always only a fragment of the ensemble. Following these thoughts, I started to collect pieces of broken concrete found on construction sites. I see these rather abstract forms as anchor points for the viewer: while she is confronted with the difficulty of perceiving the image on the floating prints, she is freed from an interpretation of the detail in the image itself, and her focus is redirected to the scene as a whole. The concrete fragments, taken out of their original environment are photographed with all their formal and material qualities. And even though they appear almost tangible, their sudden appearance stands on the cusp of a return back into the concealment.

The same conglomerate is photographed from different angles and underlines, as a recurring element, the cyclical movement of the water within the tank. With this video, the borders between the representational and the abstract dissolve. In relation to these two poles I would like to again return to the photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto: "In weakening the representational character of his images Sugimoto makes them a pointing gesture to something that cannot be named and is therefore more a reference to a virtual memory than a reference to a single object." (Wittmann) My intention in this piece is to create a space where language and

not content, guides the viewer's perception. This video of the watertank refers back to the portrait, where the unpredictable movements of floating photographs, cause the viewer to again wait to perceive the image.

3.3 A pier

The third element in the installation absorbs the previously discussed aspects and closes the circle in the form of a pure observation: a filmed seaside. The camera, in a static position, is turned towards the ocean, but its view focuses on the beach and thereby crops the line of the horizon. The upper half of the video shows waves building and breaking. Although the lower half is calmer, it still changes its appearance constantly, where the waves cover the ground with water, before being pulled back into the sea. The remaining wet surface reflects the construction of a pier standing out of frame. As the sand dries in the sun the reflection slowly disappears, but the next incoming waves moisten the sand, and the image reappears.

The static pier, with its construction of white columns, is revealed and creates a structured pattern underneath the spumous waves. Here again, a dialogue is created between stillness and movement. Opposed to the rigidity of the pier lies its mirrored picture, animated under the permanent flow of water like the constantly moving video image directed by electronical impulses. The reflection at the seaside reveals itself in thousands of facets, which resembles the endless recombinations in the digital image. During its capture within the digital recording process, the image is never recorded as a whole—its construction is a time-based process. In the moment, between becoming and fading, lies all its fragility. Furthermore, the transforming reflection indicates the volatility of the image's matter, the water in its different states. It is an appearance that floats between abstraction and world, a representation of an absence that refers to an elsewhere.

The work is projected 4 meters wide at the lower end of the wall. Underneath, the slightly shimmering floor resumes the process of waves recorded in the video within the exhibition space. The expected sound of breaking waves is silenced to create a point of focus on the repeating process of the construction and dissolution of the image.

Conclusion

This project started with my intention to observe how the digital video image behaves at the border of visibility compared to the long exposures of analogue photography. The discovery of digital noise raised questions about the construction of the video image and the constitution of the image's matter. I quickly realised that I was not interested in the moving image in the classical sense. I was more intrigued by its mechanisms: the idea that through constant movement, the image is never present as a whole and, therefore, endlessly split into fragments.

It was this volatility that attracted me in the first place. The focus on video gave me a better understanding of my previous works and allowed me to see a constant theme resonating through my research: the ungraspability of an image. The ideas of darkness and the night explored in earlier works—where the vision encounters something unattainable, something that is there but not yet revealed—were always about an approach of a presence out of reach.

Through this focus on a rather atemporal language I might use my work to create a counterpoint to the onward rush of the contemporary. In the field of new media this position can be seen as a critical standpoint towards the constant confrontation with endlessly changing interfaces. Charles Baudelaire's view of the event of photography rings true in our current situation: "Nobody can ignore that the industry, when it interacts with art, becomes the worst deadly enemy. If we allow such intervention to the spheres of the mystery and the imaginary, in everything, that only has its value because man adds a part of his soul—then woe to us!" (Dubois, p.34)

Nevertheless, I wanted to see what the technical image could provide. I see myself standing in between two positions: as both the observer and as having control through the reconstruction of the seen. Precise observation allows me to perceive the world differently, and I am convinced that with more humility and an attentive focus towards what lies outside of ourselves, we might gain a better understanding of our inner essence. This might best describe how I use photography's process; capturing the outer world to achieve an inner view of it. Through my fascination for media specificity, its mechanisms and materialities, I always seek to contemplate on the image's behaviour in time and, in doing so, refer to our own temporality. What became all the more important during my working process, and is clarified in my final installation, is that it is never just a question of the image on its own but also the dialogue it creates with the audience.

This text helped me to understand how these last two years have brought me to where I am now in my work. It helped me to clarify my interests and finally translate them into the exhibition space where the work observes the fragile moment, the

threshold of an image's existence that oscillates between presence and absence. The final installation explores the intersection of the photographic analogue still and the electronic moving image, using their media specificity as a conceptual framework to reflect on the image's relation to time.

And although temporally final, I see this project as a starting point to build up an on-going body of artistic research. With a deepened focus on the contradiction between matter and image I would like to work with different materialities and textures, work more sculpturally and concentrate even more on the viewer's position. Today I consider the graduation work as a junction of all these different aspects that wait now for continuation.

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